

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Peter Samton

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Samton conducted by Interviewer Annette Rosen in 2004. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Architect Peter Samton was one of the organizers of the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York [AGBANY], which organized a picket-line demonstration against the demolition of Penn Station in 1962 and subsequently lobbied public officials on the station's behalf. In this interview with Annette Rosen, Samton describes AGBANY's founding and its successful recruitment of a number of well-known architects to participate in the protest. He also discusses the impact that the demolition had on the views of architects and the general public toward historic buildings. The interview was conducted in 2004 in conjunction with New York Preservation Archive Project's event, "Remembering Pennsylvania Station."

Peter Samton is a renowned architect and preservation advocate in New York City's architectural community and international circles alike. Commonly linked to his long-time business partner, Jordan Gruzen, Samton's work at Gruzen and Partners—later changed to Gruzen Samton—is notable for several prominent projects in New York City and elsewhere. Focusing his career on public sector work, Samton's role in the organization AGBANY—Action Group for Better Architecture in New York, formed to protest the demolition of Pennsylvania Station—comes as no surprise. A 1957 Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture graduate, Samton has advocated for preservation causes throughout all stages of his career.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Peter Samton

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Annette Rosen

Date: 2004

Q: Would you please tell us your name, and how you got involved in the effort to save Penn [Pennsylvania] Station?

Samton: My name is Peter Samton. I was a young architect back then, in the early 1960s. I was one of the original founders of AGBANY, the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York. There were a few of us, two or three of us, who—I was in my mid-twenties at the time—heard about the possibility that Penn Station may be torn down. We went over to the AIA [American Institute of Architects], and wanted to see what the AIA was going to do about it. It turned out they were not very interested, being a very political organization at that time, and it looked like it was going to be an issue of mired in bureaucracy.

So, very quickly, we formed, with several others—Diana Kirsch, Jordan Gruzen, whom I went to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] with, and a few other people—Norman Jaffe, who's passed away—and we met with Norval White and Elliott Willensky. Norval was one of the big architects at that time, big meaning very tall amongst other things—six-foot-six, six-foot-seven—and we met at his brownstone on 61st Street. It was there that we decided that we had to do something to shake up the crowd in New York. So the picket line was one of the things that eventually came about. We thought that that

was the way, in those days, that a lot of other people, unions and such, made a commotion.

One of the things we thought we would do was we would be well dressed, and we would do these wonderful signs that were hand-lettered by architects. We got many of the young architects in our offices to come over, and the thing began to spread. Quickly, over a matter of weeks, we knew we needed a few stars and Philip Johnson was called, amongst others. Ulrich Franzen and a number of well-known people, including editors of the architectural magazines, and we had our picket line. It did seem to create a lot of attention, which is what we were looking for. But unfortunately, over the next few weeks and months, the powers in the city were such that it was inevitable that the building was going to be torn down.

On that day, in October of 1963, I came back from my honeymoon and was astonished to see that they were actually, seriously, going to go forward with this desecration of Penn Station. It was around that same time that Charles Luckman published the designs for the Madison Square Garden, and in my frustration I wrote him a letter, a very angry letter, that could only be written by a young architect—not anybody who had his own practice. It was a devastating letter to him. He was away, and about a week later I got a response from him. My letter basically said, "How can you do something so horrible? I hope you don't think you're making any contribution to society by this act of vandalism." And so forth. He wrote back a very nice letter saying, basically, "Thank you very much for your cordial greetings. Chacun à son gout," to each his own, etc.

It was a way, I guess, of venting my frustration—of getting back at the person who, as an architect, was going to replace the great work of McKim, Mead & White.

Thank you.

Q: What impact do you feel the demolition had on New York City, and, perhaps, the nation?

Samton: For one thing, for the first time the average citizen saw that Penn Station was actually a beautiful, pink color. Because when they started to demolish this very black building, they realized that the stone, the granite, was dirty. It had been that way for sixty years, since it was built, and we didn't think, in those days, that buildings could be cleaned. We didn't have any landmarks, not really any old landmarks. Paris was just beginning to clean its buildings, and so was London. I was in Paris on a Fulbright [Scholars Program grant] in the '50s, and when I went back in the mid-'60s, to see that Paris was not a black city but a white city, it was astonishing. I think many New Yorkers saw that maybe it was just a question of cleaning the building. Admittedly, there are economics at play, also, but they all thought it was a dirty old building, and what did we do but destroy a dirty building. I think, ultimately, people learned that there was much more here than just a dirty, old surface. This was a great building.

Q: Do you think the loss of Penn Station had an effect on the rest of the nation?

Samton: Yes. It had an effect on New York. New York had an effect on the rest of the nation. It didn't affect much of Europe, which was already thinking that way, but I think it had a major effect on landmarks preservation throughout this country.

Q: Well, I want to thank you very much for your remarks, and thank you for giving us a chance to take them down.

[END OF INTERVIEW]